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On Discernment

Acts 20 and 21

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For my last sermon at CPC, this morning I want to talk with you about the process of discernment. I would offer that discernment is arguably the most important component of leadership, and that without discernment of God's direction, any person or church is in big doo-doo. For the past few years, I have spent a great deal of time focusing on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. This has been an exciting time because we have sought to reclaim the full Word of God, to really see and comprehend passages of Scripture which give perspective to the excitement shared by all those in the first century church community. We have talked about cooperating with God. We have talked about using power tools in our ministry. We have talked about what Jesus really did with His time, and about what he wants us to do with our time. But the most important aspect of the preaching and teaching ministry in these last years has been to focus on new and more effective ways to listen to God. Or, to increase our ability to be in honest, practical discernment of what God wants for us.

The sections from Acts 20 and 21 this morning deal frankly, honestly, candidly with the problem with authentic discernment. As we will see, discernment is by no means an easy process.

From chapter 13 on, Acts *is* the story of Paul of Tarsus and his efforts to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was an intense man, often abrupt with people, but with a profound intellect, a keen mind, and a deep understanding of what Jesus came to do, and of who Jesus is. To understand Paul, one has to appreciate the fact that he wholeheartedly pursued whatever he was doing. He grew up as the best student of the best teacher of the Pharisees. He tenaciously persecuted the early Christian church. When Jesus came into his life, the Spirit had to grab him and metaphorically shake him, to get his attention. Then, Paul spent at least three years mostly alone, working out the incredible implications of what it meant that Jesus actually was the Christ (messiah) long expected by the Jews. When he began to preach the Good News, first to Jews and then to Gentiles, Paul was as focused as he had been his entire life. And the one thing that we must remember about Paul was that *everything* he did was for the purpose of proclaiming and explaining and persuading people that Jesus is God, sent to reconciles us to God. Paul's gig was evangelism pure and simple, and if you miss this, you miss Paul completely.

Everywhere Paul went, he preached and taught and persuaded. He began churches so that when he left a place, someone would continue the preaching, teaching and persuading. When he wrote letters, he sought to get local churches re-focused on preaching, teaching and persuading. He would set forth a principle, like the one that in Christ we are free, and then purposively set about to urge the believers not to exercise their freedom if by their restraint they might win some more to Christ. In one case he allowed a companion to be circumcised in order to win some people to Christ, and yet in another situation refused to have a different companion circumcised when it would not serve the purpose of evangelism.

Wherever he went, Paul leaned heavily on the movement of the Holy Spirit for direction. He would go to a place and preach. If the place was receptive, he would stay for a good amount of time. If the place became unreceptive, he would leave, but often not of his own desire, but because fellow believers sensed the leading of the Spirit that it was time for him to go, and in some cases let him out of the city by lowering him in a basket over the city wall by night. When you read Acts, you get the sense that Paul didn't care what happened to him - he was so focused on preaching, teaching and persuading.

And when you read Acts carefully, the ways in which the Holy Spirit directed him just leap out at you. He wanted to go here but the Spirit kept them from going there and so they went in a different direction, and in that new direction, people were receptive to the Gospel, so that's where they stayed. That kind of thing is sprinkled all throughout the Book of Acts.

At every place, Paul would find the Jews and preach to them first. When they would have no more of him, he would go to the Gentiles. As you read the chronology, you get excited about his excitement, about how he and his companions were able to see every single encounter as an opportunity to preach, teach and persuade. They lived each day with an extraordinary expectancy.

So it's no wonder that in Acts 20, Paul tells some people that he believes he is being compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. He tells his people that he doesn't know what will happen to him in Jerusalem, but he is certain the Spirit wants him to go there to do what he has done everywhere else - preach, teach, persuade. He tells them that the Holy Spirit has also let him know that wherever he goes, the possibility of prison and hardship awaits. In other words, Paul understands that the Spirit is in control, and that his life is less important than (as he puts it) 'testifying to the gospel of God's grace.'

Yet, he also tells this important group of friends that he believes he will not ever see them again. Paul has some sense that the end-game is near, and that he will at some point no longer be able to visit with them and provide corrective leadership. So he urges them to step up to the plate and take their places as shepherds and leaders. Paul knows that the greatest danger to the churches he has planted, will come from within, so he counsels these people to be watchful - to be people of discernment. Paul wants them to know that not every person who volunteers is the right person, that constant discernment is the 'partner' of Christ-centered leadership.

These particular friends grieved with Paul over his announcement that they would not see him again, but being people who had been taught by him to be discerning leaders, they accepted that all of them functioned under the direction of the Spirit of God. Though difficult, they all understood that their purpose was to give glory to Jesus.

Paul and his immediate companions then went on board a ship and sailed to Tyre, on the coast of Lebanon. There they stayed a week with the believers who were there. The reason I mention this is that the text says 'through the Spirit, these people urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.' So, here we have a problem. Paul is heading to Jerusalem because he is certain the Holy Spirit is leading him to go there. The first group he tells is sad, not about his going to Jerusalem but about his announcement that they will likely never see him again. But this second group tells Paul that the same Spirit is telling *them* to urge Paul NOT to go on. So what's up with this? Is the Spirit saying two different and opposite things?

Paul decided to proceed with his original discernment and so continued with his journey to Jerusalem. A couple of stops later, his companions and he were farther south in the coastal city of Caesarea, the main Roman bastion in Palestine. After a few

days, someone known to the believers as a prophet, a fellow by the name of Agabus, came to town and demonstrated the word he had from the Spirit, a word for and about Paul, essentially telling Paul that he would be bound over to the Gentiles if he continued on to Jerusalem. There is every reason to believe that the people who heard this prophecy believed it to be from the Holy Spirit.

And to jump ahead just a bit, when Paul finally reached Jerusalem, the brothers there warmly welcomed him, and then told him they wished he hadn't come, because he had become a lightening rod for reactivity from the Jews for his success in bringing Jews elsewhere over to Christ.

So what do we make of this? What does discernment mean? How do we have one person who feels compelled by the Holy Spirit, and others who (through the same Spirit) urge a different course of action? Who is right? How can we tell?

The way to get at this is to go back to Caesarea, Paul's last stop before making it to Jerusalem. Caesarea, the place where the prophet Agabus showed up. There we see that after Agabus gave his prophecy about what would happen *to* Paul if he continued on to Jerusalem, the people of Caesarea pleaded with Paul not to continue. With tears and sincere pleas they latched onto the prophecy from Agabus and told him not to go.

Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." That is, Paul understood their deep concern and love for him. He appreciated it. He was touched by it. He knew he had done a good job with them and he loved them with profound *agape*. Yet, he remained focused on the goal that defined his life - preaching, teaching, persuading. You see, the various points of discernment continued to be in tension with his discernment of God's will for him, and so there was the need for discernment of the discernment. Paul began to see that those who didn't want him to go to Jerusalem, had received from the Lord the discernment that this trip would likely be the beginning of the end for their beloved pastor, and Paul in fact didn't disagree with what they had got from the Spirit. He just told them it didn't matter.

It didn't matter that this trip to Jerusalem might be the beginning of the end because Paul knew from deep within his being that he was a vessel carrying the gospel, and that whatever happened to him, however God chose to use him, was in the hands of God. It didn't matter *now* because it hadn't mattered *all along*. Wherever Paul had gone, that place could have easily been the last place. Prison and hardships abounded *everywhere*. Resistance to the gospel was *always* part of the gig. The only truly important part was that through his ministry, some new people would come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

So, Paul says, let it go. It's in God's hands. As it has always been, everywhere I've gone. With Paul, I say, *thank you for your love*. Listen carefully to the Spirit and follow where He will lead. And remember that this church exists to give glory to Jesus Christ, and to become effective in witnessing to Him.

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